
Keeping It in the Family: Domestic Violence and Spectral Testimony in Contemporary American Memoirs

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Abstract | This essay considers how the cultural valuation of transparency within life writing prohibits the state to recognize and address the harm against marginalized subjects. To do so, this essay turns to two recent memoirs of childhood stricken by domestic violence: Rachel Sontag's *House Rules* (2008) and Kiese Laymon's *Heavy* (2018). *House Rules* documents Sontag's childhood growing up with an emotionally abusive father in an upper middle-class white, Jewish household, while *Heavy* documents Laymon's childhood experiences of sexual, physical, and emotional abuse in a single-parent, Black Southern household. The essay focuses, in particular, on how much of the violence Sontag and Laymon depict traces back to the nuclear family's role as a state disciplinary technology that enforces white supremacist and patriarchal kinship structures. It shows disruption of the private-public binary by excavating how Sontag and Laymon's accounts of violence in the home entangle the dysfunction at the heart of the U.S. nuclear family with the dysfunction at the heart of the U.S. nation-state. Ultimately, it proposes a life writing hermeneutic of spectrality that focuses on the structural realities that exceed the boundaries of the individual memoir.

Keywords | Life Writing, Domestic Violence, Trauma, Discipline, Legibility

The Western tradition of life writing traces back to religious confessionals, most famously Augustine's *Confessions*, which recounts the saint's sinful youth and his conversion to Christianity (Archambault 23). The religious and confession-based origins of Western life writing are still quite visible within the ostensibly secular contemporary publishing market. Life writing scholar Leigh Gilmore has coined the term "American neoconfessional" to describe contemporary U.S. audiences' obsession with narratives that follow a trauma-to-redemption arc, in which a life writer confesses to traumatic experiences, for which they are usually to blame, and then ends with joyful recollections of how they overcame their earlier, misguided years (American Neoconfessional 658). An insistence on transparency implicitly accompanies the American desire for confession: a belief that the life writer has not strategically hidden any aspect of their experience, that they have truly written to their imagined reader with the image of a priest in mind. Augustinian scholar Paul Archambault notes that a philosophy of truth as objective and transparent was also evident in the structure of Augustine's *Confessions*; the last four books of the *Confessions* are markedly more objective and impersonal than the first eight, which Archambault reads as evidence of how "Augustine's conversion to Christianity also symbolized his second and final conversion to philosophy" (Archambault 28). Not only was Augustine redeemed from sin, but he was also redeemed from partiality and bias.

The degree to which contemporary U.S. audiences share Augustine's moralized outlook on truth can be seen in the widespread outrage sparked by the revelation that James Frey, in his 2003 memoir, *A Million Little Pieces*, falsified his account of his descent into drug addiction. *A Million Little Pieces* had been an Oprah Book Club pick, and Oprah's fans were angry with both Frey and Oprah for what they saw as an abuse of their trust and empathy as readers. Life writing scholar Timothy Aubry argues that both the initial success of Frey's memoir and the controversy that followed illustrate how the American conception of truth is less about what actually happened than about narratives that conform to a middle-class view of 'authenticity,' which values the gritty aesthetics of trauma and violence as long as they are ultimately tied to individual responsibility and redemption (155).

Gilmore has in turn written extensively on the ways in which public expectations of transparency place life writers of collective trauma into a double bind (*Tainted Witness* 150). Gilmore contends that life writings that recount personal and collective experiences of harm carry within them, whether implicitly or explicitly, a call for justice. That call for justice, however, can, and often is, negated by accusations of falsification on the part of the author—accusations most often evoked to discredit writers who speak for positionalities marginalized by their class, race, gender, sexuality, and/or disability status (99). Gilmore points to global reactions to the testimony of Rigoberta Menchú, a K'iche'

Guatemalan rights activist, who published a book-length testimony to the human rights abuses committed by the Guatemalan army against Indigenous peoples throughout the Guatemalan War in 1983 (59). The white American anthropologist David Stoll subsequently published a book-length fact-check of Menchú's testimony, *Rigoberta Menchu and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans*, in 1999, which claimed that Menchú had significantly falsified her story and incited widespread, global outrage against the activist. Stoll's claims largely revolved around minor details, such as Menchú's level of education and whether she was present for her brother's murder, that do not affect the testimony's central claim as to the ubiquity of the state violence committed against Indigenous peoples of Guatemala (63). Stoll's pedantic attack and the global eagerness to discredit Menchú speaks to the structure of silencing that consolidates state power, both on the level of state-funded institutions, like the army, and the privileged citizens, like Stoll, who wield their structural power against more vulnerable subjects.

In her study of the American neoconfessional, Gilmore focuses primarily on best-selling contemporary memoirs by white women, such as *Wild* (2012) by Cheryl Strayed and *Eat Pray Love* (2010) by Elizabeth Gilbert, that illustrate a neat arc of trauma to redemption (*Tainted Witness* 111). The more recent bestsellers *Educated* (2018) by Tara Westover and *Maid* (2019) by Stephanie Land, the latter of which was recently adapted into a critically acclaimed television series,¹ can also be seen as representative of this trend, though Westover and Land do a better job of highlighting the structural reality of class stratification in America and its determining effect on life quality than Strayed and Gilbert. Although white women generally dominated the American memoir market in the 1990s and early 2000s, the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement over the past few years has drawn dominant consumer interest to memoirs by writers of color, particularly Black memoirists. The explosive reception of Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World And Me* (2015), which focuses on the debilitating reality of anti-Black police violence, captures the growing attention of white, middle-class American consumers on memoirs which address the politics of race.² Jesmyn Ward's *Men We Reaped* (2013), Margo Jefferson's *Negroland* (2015), and Ashley Ford's *Somebody's Daughter* (2021), all critically-acclaimed best-sellers, can also be read as evidence of the market's evolving focus on race in light of the growing national attention to anti-Black violence, although Ward, Jefferson, and Ford all come from different backgrounds and provide different perspectives on Blackness and Black American womanhood and should not be read through a conflationary lens.

The contemporary American memoir market's ostensible shift to narratives that represent social injustices in order to argue for action towards structural equity illustrates the importance of reading practices that can pay such accounts due diligence. Black American authors, for instance, have argued that recent white consumer interest in

¹Land's individual account of working her way out of poverty as a white, single mother, for example, arguably spectralizes the structural reality that the majority of the American domestic labor force, which encompasses services from house cleaning to nannying, is made up of underpaid and undocumented (and thus politically vulnerable) immigrant labor. Laborers under constant threat of being reported by their clients and deported by the state have much less agency than white citizens like Land over improving their work circumstances (see Chang).

²*Between the World and Me* was an instant New York Times bestseller and won the 2015 National Book Award.

narratives of Black pain and debilitation, such as Coates' *Between the World and Me*, risk transforming complex works by Black authors into mere trauma porn, meaning the treatment of Black cultural productions as entertainment for white people rather than social criticism (McKinney). This paper will in turn consider the degree to which the American public's historic fixation on narrative transparency within memoirs further risks suppressing the demands of structurally vulnerable subjects for state accountability. Questions framing this interrogation include: How does the insistence on transparent testimony in the courtroom replicate forms of disciplinary violence aimed at rendering unruly and inconvenient bodies docile? How can life writers of trauma retain both the unruliness of their testimonies and the clarity (if non-transparency) of their call for justice and accountability? Can trauma be rendered legible without being rendered docile?

To flesh out these questions, this essay turns to two recent memoirs that portray experiences of and attempted recoveries from domestic violence: Rachel Sontag's *House Rules* (2008) and Kiese Laymon's *Heavy* (2018). *House Rules* documents Sontag's childhood growing up with an emotionally abusive father and her difficulties navigating a comparatively freer life as an adult, while *Heavy* documents Laymon's childhood experiences and later reckoning with sexual, physical, and emotional abuse through a more explicit focus on the entanglement between domestic violence and the insidious state violence of patriarchy and racism. The two life narratives thus speak to quite different social contexts. Sontag comes from an upper-middle class, Jewish home, and many of her father's violent idiosyncrasies are in some ways the contortions of privilege, while Laymon is raised by an impoverished single mother in Mississippi, whose roots in Southern racial violence compound the stresses of their home life.

Nevertheless, there are important resonances between the two. Sontag's father is an ambitious and well-educated doctor, whose emotional abuse centers around his insistence that his wife and two daughters conform to his rigorous standards of respectable decorum. Much of the violence that results traces back to the ways in which the family operates as state disciplinary technology which sanctions patriarchal violence. Similarly, though not interchangeably, the tensions between Laymon and his mother that structure *Heavy* center around her unwavering commitment to educating Laymon in white institutional standards of respectability through a rigorous, and often violent, parenting style that neglects his need for emotional care. Both like and unlike Sontag's father, Laymon's mother's preoccupation with the apparent respectability of her home speaks to the material urgency of conforming private forms of domesticity to the patriarchal and white supremacist standards of the state.³

³See Saidiya Hartman's 1997 book, *Scenes of Subjection* (1997) and Hortense Spillers' 1987 essay, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," for fuller accounts of how the development of the nuclear family structure was central to the disinheritance of Black subjects from the state. Spillers focuses on how Black, female slaves were "ungendered" through their sexual exploitation as reproducers; moreover, their children were not seen as children so much as laboring objects and often violently taken away from them, leaving Black mothers always already outside the nuclear family structure. Hartman's analysis in turn focuses on the white American cultural fixation on 'appropriate' domesticity post-Emancipation. She argues that the attributes of proper domesticity that obsessed white Americans, such as hygiene and cleaning practices, operated to criminalize newly-freed Black subjects already seen as dirty and improper by the white populace. Domesticity thus became another tool of the Jim Crow South. Together, Spillers and Hartman's analyses highlight the material stakes of family appearances for contemporary Black American families, who face a centuries-long history of disinheritance from state

Precisely because of the state-sanctioned nature of domestic respectability behaviors, both memoirs trouble popular notions of what constitutes state violence and domestic abuse, as well as the often overlooked entanglement between the two. Is forcing your daughter to document how she spends her allotted hours at the library psychological abuse, or a strict parenting style that she will thank you for later? What about giving your son a homework assignment to complete at a friend's house, which contains the set of encyclopedias you can't afford, and then beating him when he fails to follow through? My approach to the question of discipline as violence will focus on how Sontag and Laymon draw connections between how their parents justify their violent disciplinary regimes to themselves and the ways in which they are rewarded, rather than admonished, by the public sphere for their privileging of discipline over care as a guiding family value. Reading Sontag and Laymon together is also useful for the different ways in which they trouble dominant notions of state violence and domestic abuse. Sontag's account positions psychological and emotional abuse as violent in effect as physical abuse, which, because it leaves visible traces, is often taken more seriously by witnessing audiences; however, she does not make explicit the connections between her father's tyranny and the patriarchal structure of the U.S. nation-state. Laymon's account in contrast often features graphic instances of physical violence, which could risk being read by a white American audience as confirmation of Black familial dysfunction; however, his explicit references to the Black American community and the material, educational, and social inequities that accompany being Black in contemporary America necessitates reading his personal experience of domestic abuse alongside the structural disinheritance of Black Americans from the sociomaterial resources that facilitate individual flourishing.

This paper's reading analytic thus also disrupts the private-public dichotomy that haunts memoirs of domestic violence by emphasizing how Sontag and Laymon's accounts of patriarchal and white supremacist disciplinary violence in the home render inseparable the traumas that haunt individual and familial bodies from the ongoing traumas haunting the national body, such as the culture of doubt that continues to characterize the reception of women's testimony and the mass criminalization and debilitation of Black Americans.⁴ Seen this way, memoirs of domestic violence do not

structures of protection (such as the law) due to their structural positioning as genderless, kinless, and uncivilized. The historical delegitimization of Black American mothers as mothers is particularly important to keep in mind when considering Laymon's mother's obsessive fixation on giving her son a proper upbringing. Similarly, Hartman's framing of hygiene as a scapegoat for white American fears of Otherness illuminates Sontag's father's fixation on his daughters' hygiene habits, which will be discussed in detail later.

The pressure Laymon's mother feels to perform proper domesticity should also be read alongside the release of the infamous Moynihan Report in 1965, nine years before Laymon was born. The Moynihan Report, titled *The Negro Family: The Case For National Action*, was written by a white sociologist, Daniel Moynihan, who at the time served as the U.S. Assistant Secretary of Labor. His report blamed widespread Black poverty in the U.S. on the prevalence of single-mother families, further stigmatizing Black mothers and insinuating that appropriate family values would be enough to earn Black Americans economic and political equality (see Moynihan).

⁴On the national level, the culture of doubt that accompanies women's testimonies, particularly when they include demands for justice and state accountability, can be seen in the discrediting of Christine Blasey Ford's testimony against Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh. Ford testified that Brett Kavanaugh sexually assaulted her in high school and evidenced her claim with a detailed personal account and corroborating material evidence (Hill). Kavanaugh was shortly thereafter appointed to the court. The continued subjection of Black Americans to debilitation by the state and disinheritance from state

so much bravely break the boundary between the personal and private as they reveal that boundary to always already serve as a mystifying cultural imaginary that invisibilizes state-sanctioned violence against vulnerable subjects. Ultimately, this paper will position Sontag and Laymon's written accounts of harm as spectral testimonies for the ways in which they document domestic abuse and state violence to be that which the state always already refuses to see.

The proposed framework of spectral testimony builds on Judith Butler's understanding of the spectral in *Frames of War*, which analyzes how media representations of war are often complicit with the state violence they claim to address. In considering the media's claim to offer a transparent look into the global realities of war, Butler argues that, "When versions of reality are excluded or jettisoned to a domain of unreality, then specters are produced that haunt the ratified version of reality" (xiii). Butler focuses particularly on affective "specters," such as the grief and rage of a violated subject that necessarily escape the camera frame. The close reading developed in the following sections builds on Butler's framework of spectrality by locating spectral testimony within gestures towards the state structures of violence embedded within the individual writer's personal experience of violation. The presence of spectral testimony is often subtle and requires the close attention that testimonies of violence deserve but are not often given. Reading for spectrality is a way of acknowledging that a given testimony cannot and should not render a subject transparent to the reader, where expectation often worsens the conditions of vulnerability a testifier already faces in making public their most debilitating life experience. An analytic of spectrality instead allows that the look into personal experience given within a testimony will necessarily be incomplete. It in turn becomes the reader's responsibility to understand the main demands of the testimony as they relate to contemporary conditions of injustice and to take the knowledge gained from personal experience and generously offered by the testifier to fight for and build a better world. Sontag and Laymon do so by highlighting the domestic as a site of violence in desperate need of national address.

Sontag opens *House Rules* with a scene from her adult life: at a friend's dinner party, she sits across from a man who asks her what she is working on. "A book about family dynamics," (vii) she replies. The man demands, "So who's the monster? [...] Your dad or your mom?" When Sontag tries to explain, "It's more about the way we worked," he persists, "So, who's the monster [...] Which one? Give it up." She finally relents that her father "plays the leading monster," (viii) and the man proceeds to drill her on *what* exactly her father did to earn the title, namely "Did he ever hit you guys." To Sontag's reply, "Never," she receives the following reaction:

protection can be seen in the ongoing execution of Black citizens by the American police force, which became visible on a global level following the murder of George Floyd in May 2020 and the summer wave of public protests that followed (Joseph). The two sites of violence—the doubting of female voice and the abjection of Black life—are by no means commensurable. It also must be stressed that Black women suffer at the intersection of the two, and that white women benefit structurally from a nation-state built on white supremacy and the exploitation of Black labor. In this paper, Sontag and Laymon are read together not to conflate gendered and racialized violence but for the way both writers testify to the harms perpetuated by the widespread assumption that the family home is a safe space that exists apart from the structural violence of the state.

That took care of that. The uncertainty drained from his face. He smiled, relieved that we wouldn't have to go *there*. He opened his mouth to speak, decided against it. I could tell, by the careful way he rested his eyes on the large piece of art hanging from the wall, that he thought he could help me see that it wasn't all that bad. (viii)

Discrediting male violence against women by figuring it as not as bad *as it could be* is not new. In her 2018 anthology addressing sexual violence, *Not That Bad: Dispatches from Rape Culture*, feminist critic Roxane Gay pointedly employs the term, “not that bad,” (vii) in order to critique the long-held cultural acceptance of male aggression and the dismissal of women's testimony. Sontag's prefacing of her memoir with a man's determination to make her rethink testifying domestic abuse as abuse situates her memoir alongside the many invisibilized histories of sexual and domestic violence silenced through patriarchal cultural norms.

Her interrogator's assumption that her father does not qualify as an abuser because he does not employ physical force would benefit from an encounter with French historian Michel Foucault. Foucault's 1975 work *Discipline and Punish* famously theorizes the ways in which modern state punishment regimes rely more on the technologies of psychological discipline and behavioral training than on overt demonstrations of physical force to implant and consolidate structures of domination. For Foucault, what distinguishes disciplinary power from other strategies of domination is the minuteness with which disciplinarians regulate individual forms of behavior in line with desired ends; he thus figures discipline as “a political anatomy of detail” (139). Foucault's emphasis on the psychological dimension of state control arguably under-theorizes the degree to which contemporary nation-states remain reliant on physical torture, particularly in colonial and militarized contexts. Nonetheless, for the purposes of life writing studies approach, the paper will rely on Foucault's articulation of state praxis that may not be obviously physical in their manifestation of force but that are nonetheless, and at times all the more, violent through the effects of discipline and silencing.

Sontag's father, Dr. Stephen Sontag governs his household through a strict and, at times, seemingly arbitrary set of behavioral rules that he believes optimize their efficiency and social competitiveness. Sontag describes how, “I was only allowed to go [to the library] when I had a specific project that required research. Always, Dad requested an outline of how I would use my ‘unmonitored’ time at the library. It was this unmonitored time that would ruin me, Dad was convinced” (8). Dr. Sontag also requires Rachel and her younger sister, Jenny to record all of their homework on a dry-erase board in the family kitchen for his cross-verification. He limits their socialization time to six to eight hours on Saturday, if homework is completed, plus one sleepover per month. They are not allowed to wear makeup. Their clothing must not be “torn or sloppy” and their fingernails must not “extend more than 0.5 cm from the cuticle corner” (119). Everyone in the family must “wake up in the morning to National Public Radio in order to keep well informed” (119).

On the surface, Dr. Sontag's rules seem neither cruel nor abusive insofar as prioritizing homework over friends, dressing neatly, and listening to NPR; they do not, in and of themselves, constitute cruel and unusual punishment. And yet it is precisely the ways in which the rigidity of Dr. Sontag's rules aligns with idealized understandings of

family and citizenship that his fascistic approach to partnership and parenting goes unquestioned and even extolled by the larger community. Family friends see the Sontags as a happy, if tightly-run, ship while Dr. Sontag's more questionable disciplinary actions, such as numbing his wife's resistance to his control by prescribing her antipsychotic medication, take place, always, behind closed doors.

Feminist theorists have pushed against the naturalization of the private, nuclear family structure precisely for the ease with which it simultaneously sanctions and invisibilizes patriarchal violence. Judith Herman directly attributes the rise of activism against domestic violence to the 1970s feminist movement. She notes that, previously, "women did not have a name for the tyranny of private life. It was difficult to recognize that a well-established democracy in the public sphere could coexist with conditions of primitive autocracy or advanced dictatorship at home" (28). Black feminist theorist bell hooks similarly positions the nuclear family as "the one institutionalized sphere of power that can easily be autocratic and fascistic" in American culture (20). However, rather than seeing the hierarchical nature of the family in contradiction with a "well-established" democratic public sphere, she relates the nuclear family's hierarchical structure to its articulation within a nation founded on and governed by the entanglement of patriarchal, white supremacist, and capitalist structures of domination. For hooks, the sentimental notions of unconditional love and privacy that overdetermine the cultural currency of the nuclear family work to obscure its political function as the building block of violent political hierarchies centered around the material power of the father.

Feminist theorizations of the family, like those offered by hooks, Hartman, and Spillers, argue for a different interpretation of Dr. Sontag's disciplinary regime. The cultural values Dr. Sontag upholds—education, hard work, and social awareness—represent offspring of the American Dream mythos that both masks and consolidates the racialized and gendered inequalities at the heart of the U.S nation-state. Under a Black feminist counter-reading, the myth that white women and people of color can, too, have it all, only works if they conform to certain respectability standards that operate to render their bodies docile rather than equal. For the state, the benefit of respectability as a disciplinary tool is thus twofold: firstly, subjects monitor and adjust their own behavior and, secondly, they adjust their behavior towards docility: respectable subjects aren't loud or demanding—they go with the flow. They read the right newspapers and support feel-good social movements without going too far in their polite requests for political justice. The irony for the respectable subject is that going with the flow often means accepting the suppression of their needs and desires as a daily reality. Feminist and queer theorist Lauren Berlant describes the phenomenon of subjects within an oppressive nation-state believing that if they fake happiness under the current state of things long enough, they will eventually be rewarded with some sort of recognition of their efforts, as "cruel optimism" (Berlant). In *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed similarly argues that happiness is often a state-enforced emotion meant to silence the complaints of queer and migrant subjects (Ahmed); if migrants express sadness at leaving their old home behind, for example, they are positioned within dominant U.S. discourse as ungrateful, deflecting conversations about global imbalances of resources that force migration from the Global South to the Global North. Under cultures of cruel optimism and compulsory happiness, only those whose values align with the prerogatives of the state experience actual contentment. Sontag's early portrait of her father as a politically

progressive ‘feminist’ exemplifies the way privileged subjects exploit the performance of respectability on the part of more vulnerable subjects:

Dad called himself a feminist, gave his secretary paid maternity leave before it was mandatory, bragged about doing it. He believed Anita Hill, supported a woman’s right to choose, later insisted on sending me to a women’s college. He worshipped Cokie Roberts, Nina Totenberg, Terry Gross—the many female voices that we heard on NPR. He kept black-and-white photographs of these women in binders, taking them out on occasion to show us the people behind the voices. It was the voices that he liked. That he believed and trusted and felt a certain safety in. *These were women without bodies*, black-and-white faces. These were women Dad would never have to know, the sexless women that he loved. (6; emphasis added)

Read one way, Dr. Sontag’s politics are laudatory. He believes in paid maternity leave and access to abortion, two main causes of the mainstream feminist movement. Read otherwise, his binder of female radio personalities recalls Foucault’s panopticon: a visual technology that delimits where and how its surveilled subjects should position themselves. The women come out of the album only when Dr. Sontag chooses and only to support his narrative of their cultural respectability. As Sontag describes, by bringing their subjectivity to life through black-and-white photography, the threat of their potentially unruly, female bodies is flattened and contained. Significantly, the women in the binder: Cokie Roberts, Nina Totenberg, and Terry Gross, are all involved in progressive U.S. media and journalism, meaning that their careers and livelihoods depended on a disciplined balance between social critique and public respectability.

Dr. Sontag’s punishment regime similarly resembles techniques of state control and discipline. Often throughout Sontag’s childhood, he had his wife awaken in the middle of the night in order to have a family conversation about her disobedience. Sontag recounts an exemplary moment in which her father has recently been served divorce papers. In response, Dr. Sontag has his wife wake Sontag up at three in the morning so that he can blame the divorce papers on her ‘strategic’ attempts to turn her mother against him. He calls Sontag “conniving,” telling her that, “you’re not going to be able to brainwash your mother anymore” (150) and that she reminds him of Saddam Hussein. Sontag explains how at that point in the night,

I had a decision to make: to get involved or not. Often, I did get involved, not to seriously fight allegations such as my likeness to Saddam Hussein, but to get out of my head and hear the physical noise of my own voice. But it was riskier to get involved. It meant committing to hours of sitting around the living room, punching at pieces of a conversation that had nothing to do with communication or, as I was beginning to realize, sanity or love. (151)

Though Sontag frequently does fight back against her father, just as often she gives in and tells him what he wants to hear in order to escape the dehumanizing experience of unrelenting interrogation. Only when she agrees to repeat his accusations back to him verbatim does her father allow her to return to bed.

Here the parallels emerge between Dr. Sontag’s patterns of abuse and common techniques of state discipline. In *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, Marxist

theorist Jonathan Crary describes how sensory and emotional deprivation have become central to contemporary U.S. torture and interrogation techniques, with sleep deprivation acting as a favored means within military black sites. Crary relates the popularity of sleep deprivation to the way in which “the denial of sleep” serves as “the violent dispossession of self by external force, the calculated shattering of an individual,” enforcing “abject states of compliance,” which “[fabricate] a world that radically excludes the possibility of care, protection, or solace” (7–8). By radically and randomly disrupting an individual’s circadian rhythms, state officials can quickly fracture that individual’s most basic sense of agency over her own body and mind. As both Crary’s research into state interrogation and Sontag’s experiences with her father show, sleep deprivation serves as a particularly effective method with which to get a prisoner to admit to false accusations. Deprived of any form of “care, protection, or solace” (8) that takes her emotional and bodily needs seriously, a prisoner begins to relate to her voice during the interrogation process as merely an unsubstantial “physical noise,” (8) while the voice of her captor determines the truths and reality she must accept in order to access the primal relief of unconsciousness. Crary’s analysis also highlights the importance of reading for spectrality—the signs of life that subsist beneath the surface of the text—as the words and actions of a captive are often deeply informed by the threat of displeasing their captor, and can still be long after they have escaped captivity.

Sontag’s experience of gaslighting and dehumanization through the deprivation of both emotional and physical forms of care and protection thus reintroduces the question of whether the line her later interrogator draws between physical and ‘not so bad’ forms of abuse represents a false dichotomy that enacts a similar form of silencing. In her work on the discrediting of women’s testimonies, Gilmore describes how conflicts over the judicial weight of a given testimony “may occur whenever personal accounts are introduced into the public sphere, but particularly when those accounts concern the relation between individual injury and collective politics and make a claim for the representativeness of one person’s experience of, or perspective on, violence” (78). For Gilmore, the paradoxical nature of individual testimonies that stand in for collective histories of violence stems from how they attempt to make legible multifaceted and fragmentary histories of repeated trauma through a single testimony judged primarily for its coherency. Traumatized individuals speaking from a marginalized subject position bear the additional burden of always already lacking the authority of truth under the public eye. Her interrogator’s fixation on whether Sontag’s father physically abuses her ostensibly points to one tangible way a testimony of violence can be ruled insufficient in the courtroom: by lacking visual evidence, such as bruises; however, and more importantly, such a tactic of discrediting embodies the false assumption that the viability of Sontag’s testimony depends more on the material reality of corroborating evidence than the receptivity of a misogynistic public sphere to seeing patriarchal discipline as a form of violence.

What becomes obvious throughout *House Rules* is that Dr. Sontag gets away with his behavior not because he does not go so far as to beat his wife and daughters but because his paternal disciplinary regime and his claim to complete power in the house are essentially state-sanctioned. In one telling scene, Sontag describes how she and Jenny discover that her father has accidentally left a mysterious safe he keeps in his bedroom unlocked, on a night in which both of their parents are out of the house. To their horror,

but not necessarily surprise, they find that the safe contains a collection of mini-tapes on which their father has recorded their family conversations. Sontag, Jenny, and a friend of Jenny's listen to an exchange between Sontag and her father, in which he makes her repeat (his) reasons for why she recently disobeyed him:

'Because you hate yourself.'
'Because I hate myself.'
'Because you have no self-respect.'
'Because I have no self-respect.' (135)

As they listen to more and more tapes, which provide repetitions of the same theme, Sontag describes,

Listening to the tapes had the tiring effect of watching a movie over again. It was a lackadaisical attention I paid, as my mind began to fish around for things we could do with the tapes. We had proof. 'Can we take him to court?' Jenny said. 'And sue him.' 'For?' 'Mental cruelty.' 'It's pretty impossible to sue on the grounds of mental cruelty.' Jenny and I had become avid after-school watchers of *Divorce Court*, and knew enough about mental cruelty to know it was never enough. (138)

Despite her claims to near-boredom in the "lackadaisical attention she paid," (138) she later briefly admits that, after watching the tapes, "I felt paralyzed in the way one does after witnessing a stranger having a heart attack" (138). Sontag's phrasing indicates her alienation from her traumatized self, as, in the tapes, it is not a stranger being tortured but herself. Read alongside the content of the tapes, of course, the "lackadaisical" (138) temperament is a strategic performance: people have thought Sontag was being dramatic or underplayed the seriousness of her father's abuse for most of her life. Throughout *House Rules*, physical evidence of Dr. Sontag's domestic abuse continually makes its way into the public sphere. He sends counselors at Sontag's school similar recordings of strange family conversations and letters of apology he makes Sontag write that center around her innate badness, evidencing his continual whittling down of her self-esteem and his paranoiac need to be obeyed. Sontag's problem is not that her father's abuse is emotional or intangible in form, resistant to legibility and recognition. There are not sufficient institutional structures of protection and care in place to admonish and intervene in situations of patriarchal violence. One can infer from Sontag's statement that she and her sister learn from watching *Divorce Court* "mental cruelty [is] never enough," that it is not primarily female defendants whom the state refuses to hold accountable to spousal testimonies of mental cruelty.

In *Tainted Witness: Why We Doubt What Women Say About Their Lives*, Gilmore outlines the patriarchal cultural attitudes, legal structures, and strategies of discrediting that always already make women's testimony disproportionately vulnerable to victim-blaming and dismissal in and outside of the courtroom. She notes that the ideological conditions of neoliberalism have worsened the paternalistic atmosphere that emerges around women's testimony. Her argument centers on how, "neoliberalism presents an aspirational but false agency to an individual cleansed of history" (11). The neoliberal narrative that all individuals have equal agency, which ignores histories of political disenfranchisement and material debilitation, obscures the reality of gendered power

relations that do not magically disappear when a man and woman enter the courtroom. Moreover, emphasizing individual agency makes it easy to understate the ubiquity of rape culture and its enactment through individual actions and cultural discourse and normalized gender performances. Thus, in the same stroke, the entanglement of neoliberalism and patriarchy renders women's testimonies of male violence more suspicious in the public eye *and* positions women as having the greater power to provoke harm. *Yes, she can*, becomes just another way of saying, *No, he didn't*.

Attributing the reasons why Dr. Sontag's abusive behavior is allowed to go unchecked to anxieties regarding its intangibility and prospective illegibility in a courtroom can similarly risk diverting attention from the quite tangible material conditions that both prevent Sontag's mother from going through with the divorce papers and that stop the young Sontag herself from pursuing legal emancipation. Setting aside the more obvious fact that a wealthy and publicly-respected doctor will necessarily have the upper hand over his dependents in any court of law in the United States, staying under his roof also assures Sontag and her mother of continued access to the material and social capital that he has accrued throughout decades of fascistic social climbing and exploitation of their uncompensated domestic labors. At one point in her late adolescence, Sontag makes a successful plea to a social worker to temporarily remove her from her household. The social worker takes her to a local girls home called The Harbor, where Sontag witnesses both the lack of resources on the part of social work institutions, low socioeconomic status, and limited opportunities for upward mobility that predominantly characterize minors who inhabit the foster system. Over their phone conversations while Sontag stays at The Harbor, her mother convinces her to come home by emphasizing this discrepancy of life quality between state structures of care and their upper-class, if emotionally bereft, home:

Mom was always reminding me how soon I'd get away, and how expensive my getaway would be if I had to do it without Dad paying my college tuition. To drive the point home, Mom said Dad owed me. That I should at least stick around to get the thing I deserved. 'After all this baloney,' she would say, and hearing her put it that way made sense. I had access to things the girls at The Harbor didn't. I'd been promised a better return for my investment. (100–101)

In this framework, Sontag's 'investment' is the years she has tolerated and labored under her father's disciplinary regime; the college education her father will pay for to maintain the family's image of respectability represents the return on her investment that convinces her to choose material security and emotional harm over a fragile structure of state care and material deprivation. Moreover, it is mentioned that the other girls at Harbor House are predominantly girls of color, which Sontag doesn't reflect on but does let slip through the brief mention that her roommate is "the only other white girl" (94). The spectralized presence of the other girls who lack Sontag's racial and class privileges illuminates both Sontag's blindspots as a narrator and the larger lack of national attention and sympathy paid to domestic violence victims of color.⁵

⁵Black women who injure or kill their abusive partner in self-defense are, for example, far more likely to be tried and incarcerated than their white counterparts (Mentu).

If *House Rules* is a testimony to anything, it is a testimony to the ways in which the state sanctions patriarchal disciplinary violence and renders women and childrens' accounts of domestic harm inadequate to disrupting the material conditions that invisibilize and facilitate the continued violation of their minds and bodies. This paper's reading of Sontag's memoir does not locate its potential subversiveness in the legible evidence of domestic violence—the tape recordings and the letters of apology that are offered to and ultimately ignored by the public— but in the spectral testimony to undisciplined rage that emerges as shadow figures in Sontag's account of her family life. Several brief scenes scattered throughout *House Rules* depict moments in which Sontag's mother's animal fury breaks through her standard demeanor of compliance. One, situated early in the memoir, is particularly striking for the language Sontag uses to depict it. The incident occurs during one of Dr. Sontag's standard punishment rituals, performed after the family misses their flight at the airport:

Mom got up from the table and, oblivious to the fact that we were in public, put her hands on her head and let out a shrill that sounded very much like a farm animal being slaughtered. Then she placed her hands on her hips, gave her head a shake, and yelled, 'I'm so sick of this Steve,' in a voice that did not belong to her, a voice that sounded like it had run away from the body it belonged to years ago. (7)

Both Sontag's description of her mother's voice sounding "like a farm animal being slaughtered," and as if "it had run away from the body it belonged to years ago," speak to the self-fracturing effects of living under a regime of sustained, disciplinary violence. The incoherency of her mother's rage—the ways in which it appears to have fragmented itself from her legible subjectivity—adds a new dimension to understanding the misplaced ethics of narrative transparency. Insisting on clarity within testimonies of violence misses the point. The central problem haunting the Sontag family is not how Mrs. Sontag winds up screaming like an animal in the middle of an airport, rather than explaining her situation to either a judge or a therapist in more rational terms. The real problem is how the cause of her rage can sit calmly before her, knowing that the first thought of most people walking by, witnesses to the scene, will not be *you tell him girl*, but *crazy bitch*.

Like Sontag's *House Rules*, Kiese Laymon's *Heavy* documents its author's attempts to break free from the emotional remnants of a violent parental disciplinary regime and owes its existence as a document to its author's early indoctrination into the respectability values of education and literacy. However, not only does the gendered power dynamic between Laymon and his mother represent a reversal of that between Sontag and her father, but also the external pressure Southern anti-Black racism contributes to and complicates the intensity of and tensions within their mother-son relationship. Laymon's mother, long separated from his father, raises Laymon by herself and, as, variously, a continuing student, research fellow, and adjunct professor, often struggles to keep food on the table. Moreover, in stark contrast to Dr. Sontag's public profile, as a socially ambitious Black woman her academic success makes her susceptible to the scrutiny of the white public sphere and isolates her from the local Black community.⁶ She in turn

⁶In her essay, "The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual," Hortense Spillers examines how Black American intellectuals and writers, particularly those working within the academy, have historically aligned with the

focuses her remaining energy on training Laymon to emulate a similar mode of constant discipline and learning that develops into an abusive form of codependency between the two lifelong students.

And yet, unlike *House Rules*, *Heavy* does not serve as a disavowal of Laymon's connection to his mother but as an ambivalent love letter written directly to her that neither repudiates nor fully embraces what she has taught him about language and survival. "I am writing a different book to you," Laymon proclaims in *Heavy*'s opening pages, "because books, for better and worse, are how we got here, and I am afraid of speaking this to your face" (9). The question of whether writing helps protect Laymon and his mother from patriarchal and racist material conditions or merely disciplines their bodies into perpetuating those conditions within domestic spaces haunts his account of love and violence that follows.

The form of *Heavy* thus directly disrupts the private/public dichotomy through which the home is often read. Written in second person address to his mother that is designed to open up an honest conversation between them about her abusive behavior, Laymon's words throughout retain a sense of intimacy—a sense that his account, while partly legible to an outside reader, is not for them. However, Laymon's tracing of his and his mother's dysfunctional coping mechanisms, which range from dishonesty in intimate relationships to gambling and over-eating, to the material disenfranchisement of the Black community and the culture of toxic masculinity that pervades intimate relationships, or "how we are taught to love in *America*," (10; emphasis added) betrays how, equally, it is important to him that a national audience is listening. Laymon's simultaneous protection of his memoir as a conversation between him and his mother and his articulations of the ways in which outside forces—state institutions and white people in particular—are complicit in their experiences of and susceptibility to violence in turn enact a productive ambiguity surrounding the imagined boundary between the private home and the public sphere.

The vulnerable nature of both Laymon and his mother's relation to the public sphere is also what makes his narrative of domestic abuse distinct from Sontag's. Unlike Dr. Sontag, for Laymon's mother, the white respectability values that shape her parental disciplinary regime are not confirmation of her structural power but one of the few avenues she has through which to acquire some power, or at least feel as if she has some power, over her social and material circumstances. In one passage, Laymon describes how his mother had her picture hung on a local grocery store shame wall for repeatedly bouncing checks when paying for groceries. He reflects on,

what it felt like to have a face like yours, one of the most beautiful recognizable faces in our world, plastered on the wall at the biggest grocery store in North Jackson because you claimed you had money in the bank you didn't really have. You were the only local black political scientist on TV during election season talking about politics. The way you overpronounced your words, defended poor black communities in the face of white resentment, and insisted on correcting

values of white, middle-class Americans and worsened conditions of poverty and disenfranchisement for the majority of the Black American community. She argues that contemporary Black intellectuals must work towards incorporating community knowledges and perspectives into their work if they want to contribute to racial equity in America.

everyone whose subjects and verbs didn't agree made black folk in Jackson think we had plenty of lunch money, gas money, rent money, and light bill money.

We didn't. (31)

The performance of respectability and intelligence thus becomes a way to craft the appearance of structural power, when the reality is that Laymon and his mother are always hovering on the edge of material destitution. Given the extent to which anti-Black racism is ingrained in U.S. culture, the public sphere positions Laymon and his mother's bodies as unruly regardless of whether their nails extend more than half a centimeter beyond their cuticles.⁷ For Laymon's mother, adeptness in white standards of writing and verbal communication acts a way for the mind to disavow what the body signifies. For example, when Laymon goes over to his friend, Beulah Beauford's house, his mother tells him to use the nice set of encyclopedias Beulah's parents own to write an essay or short story. Laymon fails to do the assignment, as he is traumatized by having witnessed Beulah get sexually assaulted by a group of boys. When he gets home, Laymon's mother demands why he doesn't have any writing to show her, and he does not feel comfortable telling her about the witnessed sexual assault because "sexuality and bodies and feeling good and pain and tender touch and booties were something we never ever talked about" (42). Laymon's mother responds to his non-answer by saying Laymon "not doing the essay was another tired example of refusing to strive for excellence, education, and accountability when excellence, education, and accountability were requirements for keeping the insides of black boys in Mississippi healthy and safe from white folk" (27). In parsing apart the different relationship to testimony people of color occupy within racist spheres of judgement, Gilmore describes how, "the testimonial limitations imposed on people of color are traceable in the violence that greets their embodied presence prior to any opportunity to present a verbal account that would be heard" (158). As a result, Laymon's mother views making their verbal accounts legible and respectable to a white audience as their only chance at survival and social mobility. For Laymon, however, his growing awareness of the inevitability of the racial violence that disciplines what he and his mother can say in public without threatening their already tenuous safety makes his mother's commitment to white standards of literacy both in and outside of their home a questionable, if not self-destructive, investment. In his essay, "If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?" James Baldwin positions language as "a political instrument, means, and proof of power" (5) and argues that the white stigmatization of Black English speaks not to an objective analysis of which forms of language are superior tools of communication but to the devaluation of Black life. He contends that, "the brutal truth is that the bulk of white people in America never had any interest in educating black people, except as this could serve white purposes. It is not the black child's language that is in question, it is not his language that is despised: it is his experience" (6). Like

⁷In her book, *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia*, Black studies scholar Sabrina Strings traces the modern Western correlation of fatness with moral weakness to Enlightenment era imperial narratives of the savagery of the colonized Other. Possessing a disciplined (i.e. thin) body thus developed as a specifically white standard that claimed to be about bodily health but in fact served to support national narratives of the racial inferiority of people of color. Strings traces the continued effects of this history in the contemporary U.S. health system's degrading and patronizing treatment of poor black women, the population most often blamed for the obesity crisis.

Baldwin, Laymon understands the debate over whether Black English is as acceptable of a language as the King's English to be a scapegoat for the white determination to maintain structural power.

A passage in *Heavy* that addresses racially-targeted police violence illustrates both the stakes of Laymon's mother's commitment to literacy in whiteness and Laymon's own perspective on the futility of literacy as a survival strategy. In the scene, Laymon's mother is pulled over while driving home under the false accusation that she changed lanes without signalling. While she is interrogated, she restrains Laymon from coming to her defense and arguing with the officer, refuses to get out of the car when asked—aware of the risk that she will be shot—and is eventually, and reluctantly, allowed to go when the officer identifies her as a student at the University of Maryland. When she and Laymon arrive home, both of them physically and emotionally traumatized, she tells him “to write about what [he] learned from the experience with the police” (83). Giving her son an analytical writing assignment after and on a difficult experience serves as a coping mechanism that helps her tolerate her basic lack of control over her and her son's safety in the outside world. Laymon, however, experiences his mother's writing assignment as a disciplinary violence that attempts to both subdue his unruly feelings towards the racist police officer and, more generally, Black men's susceptibility to state execution, while also forcing his critical analysis of the experience to conform to the same institutional framework of respectability that marks his and his mother's bodies as expendable in the first place. Laymon describes his reasons for hesitancy thus: “I wasn't sure what to write because I wasn't sure how to live life in a way that didn't give them a chance to shoot us out of the sky. It seemed like just driving, or walking into a house, or doing your job, or cutting a grapefruit was all it took to get shot out of the sky” (83). At a deeper level than his mother, Laymon understands that literacy and other structures of respectability cannot save them from the threat of racial violence because their bodies are always already that which threaten the respectability of the white public sphere. He describes how, “We all had cops rough us up, chase us, pull guns on us, call us out of our names. We all watched cops shame our mamas, aunties, and grandmamas. We all floated down I-55 creating lyrical force fields from the police and everything the police protected and served, rapping, ‘A young nigga got it bad ‘cause I'm brown,” (95) demonstrating the depth of his and all his friends' lived experience being carefully surveilled within the public sphere just by merit of their presence as Black people.⁸

A more immediate concern for Laymon is how his mother's perpetual disempowerment, combined with the ferocity with which she nevertheless devotes herself to self-discipline and social uplift, results in suppressed feelings of rage that she takes out on his body. Laymon describes how,

⁸Black studies and surveillance studies scholar Simone Browne traces the contemporary proliferation of surveillance technologies, from the iPhone's facial recognition technology to the obsessive security culture of post-9/11 airports, to the use of wanted ads and skin branding to track escaped slaves during U.S. plantation slavery. Browne analyzes how the structure of racialization developed during the plantation era is still on display in the implicit racialization of contemporary technologies, such as facial recognition software's well-documented difficulties recognizing Black faces. She concludes that cultures of surveillance remain oriented towards keeping white bodies safe from Black bodies (*Dark Matters*).

I knew you didn't want white folk to judge you if I came to school with visible welts, so you beat me on my back, my ass, my thick thighs instead of my arms, my neck, my hands, and my face [...] I knew that if my white classmates were getting beaten at home, they were not getting beaten at home because of what any black person on Earth thought of them. (69)

Laymon's mother justifies her physical abuse by claiming that Laymon's unruliness forces her to resort to more extreme disciplinary measures in order to protect his chances at surviving in a white supremacist world. In writing *Heavy*, however, Laymon strives to both understand and push against his mother's thinking by tracing the ways in which her decision to turn to physical abuse represents a missed opportunity—a funneling of both her unruly rage and her capacity for care into the forms of patriarchal violence that have disciplined her body.

In a generous alignment of scenes, Laymon positions his grief and anger over witnessing physical violence against his mother alongside his description of how physical punishment begins to structure her parental disciplinary regime. In the first, he describes being picked up from a friend's house only to find his mother's left eye was filled with a clout of blood. "The brown flesh around the eye was darker and puffed up twice its normal size. It looked like someone put a tiny plum under your eyelid" (44–45). Laymon surmises that his mother's boyfriend, Malachi Hunter, one of the richest men in their community, has beaten her. For the rest of the night, his mother, her mask of control briefly broken down, relies on him for emotional and physical care. Laymon describes how they end up falling asleep together:

When you finally put your arm around my neck, *I felt all of your weight*. "Hold me tight, Kie," you said from our bed. "You're my best friend. I'm sorry," you said as you fell asleep with the covers over the swollen, slick parts of your face. "I'm sorry for all of this." "You my best friend, too," I told you. "My best friend ever." Lying next to you in that bed, I remembered the first time you told me I was your best friend. I knew you kissed my cheeks because you loved me. I knew you asked me to hold you tighter because you loved me. You were so gentle. For more than a year, this was how we spent some of our mornings in my room and yours. Then you met Malachi Hunter. A few weeks later, you started to beat me for talking back and for way-less-than-excellent grades. (45–46; emphasis added)

In a memoir that documents a sustained pattern of severe physical abuse, it is significant that Laymon only describes feeling *all* of his mother's weight during a light embrace. His choice of phrasing expresses one of the larger arguments of *Heavy*: that the weight of being disciplined into patterns of interpersonal violence "far more than how much, or how little we weigh" (10) is what immobilizes Laymon and his mother.

What he feels is not his mother's arm around his neck but the way her being has been fundamentally altered by Hunter's act of violence, weighted down by the awareness that she is not free but bound to patriarchal codes of female obedience within her immediate community. In her discussion of the near impossibility of recovering a self from the aftermath of traumatic violence, Herman describes how, "even after release from captivity, the victim cannot assume her former identity. Whatever new identity she develops in freedom must include the memory of her enslaved self. Her image of her

body must include a body that can be controlled and violated. Her image of herself in relation to others must include a person who can lose and be lost to others” (93). Laymon’s mother cannot help but be a person shaped by an intimate knowledge of the possibility of violence and the price of disobedience. But what Laymon finds questionable is how she takes her continued experiences of violation as evidence not of the futility of her cultivated survival strategies but of the fact that she must more closely model them according to the prerogatives of white supremacy and patriarchy. Under this logic, Malachi Hunter’s treatment of her as deserving of beating serves as a lesson not of his inhumanity and the inhumanity of the system that shapes him, but of the violent form of relation one must learn to adapt to and mimic in order to survive.

The entanglement between his mother’s traumatic entry into a disciplinary logic of domination and her investment in Laymon’s education and literacy is in turn something contradictory in *Heavy* as testimony. If his deftness with words is the result of extensive disciplinary violence, then is it so different from the bruised eye of his mother he uses those words to describe? And if the expendability of Black bodies is the precondition of the institutional sphere in which *Heavy*, as an American memoir, circulates, can either it or the evidence of abuse it contains be rendered legible as testimony to an injustice?

As with *House Rules*, *Heavy* is authored by and through a voice aware of the ways in which its very manifestation through writing it is, foundationally, matching the pitch of its abuser. Throughout his childhood, Laymon questioned his mother’s investment in literacy, knowing from watching his mother continue to suffer from poverty and structural disenfranchisement, despite her successful career as a political scientist in the academy, that education would not save them. Sontag similarly despised her father’s obsession with success in school and public respectability. However, both authors pursued public careers in writing, necessarily requiring them to speak to the national audience their parents had raised them to please. Both authors rely on this structuring irony to show how the respectability behaviors valued by their abuser, through their disciplining of bodies and subjectivities judged unruly by the white patriarchal public sphere, are concomitant with structures of state violence, meaning they represent vanguards of power held elsewhere rather than pathways to individual empowerment. To the extent that either memoir works against the structures of respectability that underlay Sontag and Laymon’s traumatic educations, they do so through the voices that remain implied but silent, from the invisibilized girls of color in the foster system Sontag briefly inhabits to the many contemporary Black American families also suffering under the pressure to perform according to white domesticity, who pursue other avenues of survival besides literacy and whose stories consequently never make it to the public sphere: the specters that exist outside the frame of the story.

However, the act of writing is not as hopeless in *Heavy* as it is in *House Rules*, which Sontag frames with the public’s continued hesitancy to believe her story. Laymon, more than but also *because of* his mother, understands that while the education in which she has invested her hopes for their survival will not save her, its energy can be redirected to something beyond state violence and legibility. In the final chapter of *Heavy*, he writes:

I will remind you that I did not write this book to you simply because you are a black woman, or deeply southern, or because you taught me how to read and

write. I wrote this book to you because, even though we harmed each other as American parents and children tend to do, you did everything you could to make sure the nation and our state did not harm their most vulnerable children [...] You taught us to give our lives and work to the liberation of black children in this country. I am working on that, and I finally understand there can be no liberation when our most intimate relationships are built on— and really inflicted by—deception, abuse, misdirection, antiblackness, patriarchy, and bald-faced lies. Not teaching me this would have been the gravest kind of abuse. (238–239)

Though Laymon's mother taught him this lesson of liberation by inflicting multiple violences on his body, here Laymon considers how he nevertheless learned to recognize those acts *as* violence because her lifelong fixation on the survival of the Black community taught him to scout for other, better ways to help the community survive. If *Heavy* as a written testimony is a documentation of disciplinary violence, its form of address as a love letter is where it bends towards something else—towards the logic of interpersonal and intercommunity care; the scene of Laymon's mother wrapping her arm around him introduces love into its larger atmosphere of violence. As in the brief but heavy intimacy between Laymon and his mother in that moment, *Heavy*'s testimonial potential accrues through its offering of a space in which to share the weight of experiencing one's body as expendable. By using the memoir form to name respectability as a trojan horse of state-sanctioned forms of disciplinary violence, such as anti-Blackness and patriarchy, Laymon leans into the subversive potential of language as made heaviest not through the direct force of legibility but through the communication of what has been silenced between those who have been silenced: by giving weight to the specters in the room.

On the surface, both Sontag and Laymon offer standard trauma narratives in their memoirs. *House Rules* and *Heavy* document childhood experiences of emotional and physical domestic abuse and then move into a description of the ways in which those childhood traumas continue to haunt their adulthoods. While neither writer ends their account by fully embracing the possibility of recovery, they do both end on a tepidly hopeful note; Sontag gives us a scene of herself literally turning away from her childhood home, while Laymon offers an incantation of the survival strategies that may better serve the Black community than his mother's investment in uplift narratives. However, reading the apparent legibility of their accounts of trauma and recovery against both texts' evocations of how disciplinary violence against vulnerable dependents is illegible *as* violence within a paternalistic state calls into question the degree to which either writer locates justice in the act of writing to the American public, or what Laymon describes as, "that old black work of pandering and lying to folk who pay us to pander and lie to them every day" (1). Instead, this paper advocates reading for what subsists between the lines within Sontag and Laymon's written accounts of violence in the home, both in terms of the emotional pain of violence for which language is necessarily inadequate and in terms of the larger community of victims of domestic abuse and state violence who, unlike Sontag and Laymon, lack access to the publishing sphere. Reading for such spectral testimonies in turn works against the fact that the demand for transparency that accompanies life writings, particularly those framed as testimonies of violence, itself perpetuates the violence of state discipline. How can a daughter speak about the pain of psychological abuse when audiences are unlikely to believe in forms of abuse that lack

physical evidence? How can a Black American writer speak honestly about abuse in their home without confirming white American narratives of Black familial dysfunction? The problem with compulsory transparency is that it allows the dominant players in a given reading public the power to set the terms of what they will believe and who they will find responsible for it.

While shifting attention to spectrality does not mean giving up on language, writing, and storytelling as potentially radical forms of knowing, it does entail a praxis of reading centered around what Saidiya Hartman describes as “the imperative to respect black noise—the shrieks, the moans, the nonsense, and the opacity, which are always in excess of legibility and of the law” (12). Spectral testimony decenters transparency and respectability as guideposts for who deserves justice and recenter accountability to material histories of state violence fully legible only to those who lived them. Laymon and Sontag’s memoirs make clear that the subversive potential of spectrality can only go so far in a pseudo-democratic nation-state context in which disciplinary violence against vulnerable bodies conditions hegemonic material structures. However, their memoirs also show how writing with a side-eye towards the national insistence on respectability can at least trouble the American desire for a feel-good narrative of trauma and redemption. What pushes against the limits of the page within each memoir is also what gives its writer a way out.



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